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After Hamas is gone, how will Israel deradicalize Palestinians in Gaza?

Most Gazans approve of Hamas's decision to launch the war on October 7 and would prefer Hamas rule over the US-backed Palestinian Authority

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In June, Fadi al-Wadiya, a physiotherapist from Doctors Without Borders, was killed in an Israeli strike in Gaza. Doctors Without Borders quickly took to social media, condemning the "abhorrent" attack in multiple languages in a post that received millions of views and thousands of shares.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) responded by publishing photographic evidence that al-Wadiya was an operative in the missile program of the terrorist group Islamic Jihad in Gaza and therefore, a legitimate target. He was a physiotherapist, but he was also a terrorist.

Upon returning from a trip to the region last month, we have been struck by the inclination among Americans to assume that Hamas represents only **a narrow slice of Gaza's population**. Many seem unaware, at best — or purposely ignoring, at worst — of the extent to which Hamas has its tentacles entrenched into Gazan society. That is why a sustainable peace will depend on the creation of a deradicalization campaign that helps to erode Hamas's base of support.

Palestinian polling from June suggests that the majority of **Gazans are still satisfied with Hamas** and that the level of satisfaction has gradually increased since last year. Similarly, most **Gazans approve of Hamas**'s decision to launch the war on October 7 and would prefer Hamas rule over the US-backed Palestinian Authority (PA). Shortly after the Hamas massacre, videos surfaced of Gazan residents cheering at the sight of wounded or dead Israeli hostages arriving on trucks and motorbikes.

In early June, the IDF rescued four hostages from Gaza. Outrage swirled on social media when a prominent Gaza doctor and his renowned journalist son were killed during the raid. Except, it turns out, the doctor and journalist were actually the ones holding these hostages on behalf of Hamas.

It gets worse.

While visiting an IDF base, we watched raw footage from the October 7 attacks that had not been publicly released due to its gruesome, disturbing nature. After Hamas terrorists blew open border fences and entered Israel with rifles, grenades, missile-launchers, and anti-tank explosives, average Gazans then filed into the Israeli border communities to rape, murder, and loot. A mob of these Gazans, lacking the wartime weapons of Hamas's military wing, killed and beheaded an agricultural worker at a kibbutz with a garden hoe.

During our trip, we also visited an IDF unit that collected intelligence from the scenes of the October 7 attack and from Gaza. The retrieved items included schoolbooks that deny the legitimacy of Israel, promote violence against its Jewish citizens, and feature games and puzzles that teach antisemitism to young Gazans.

No good can come from a blind insistence that there's a small number of bad Hamas leaders, separate and distinct from some two million Gaza residents who just want a better life. That's just not the reality on the ground, where Hamas is a terrorist group, a civil government, and a religious movement all rolled into one.

Frighteningly, Hamas's tools for indoctrinating children parallel scenes from Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust memorial, which features books and games from early 1930s Germany similarly teaching kids to hate Jews. One Israeli speaker told us that the Germans didn't stop hating Jews after World War II out of the goodness of their hearts. Rather, occupying Allied personnel forced de-nazification upon them.

Untangling the web of extremism

That's where the international community can help: by mobilizing the right people, organizations and governments to begin a deradicalization effort in Gaza and detangle the web of power and influence Hamas has built.

In theory, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which provides food, healthcare, education, and other basic civil services to Gazans registered as

refugees in 1948 and to their descendants, would lead such a deradicalization effort. But UNRWA cannot be trusted to carry out this task.

According to Israel's Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, at least 12 UNRWA employees participated in the October 7 massacre, at least 30 more assisted, and over 10% of the agency's employees in Gaza have ties to terror. Terrorists in Gaza have repeatedly used UNRWA facilities as bases for their operations. In February, the IDF discovered a Hamas data center hidden underneath UNRWA's Gaza headquarters.

Breaking UNRWA's monopoly on services in the enclave is critical.

These should be disaggregated and assigned to other UN organizations that have a global mandate. UNRWA, by contrast, was created solely for Palestinians, employs almost exclusively Palestinians, and has been co-opted by an extreme version of the Palestinian national narrative. That needs to change.

The United States can help. Our colleagues at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies published a report earlier this year that describes how.

For example, the US Agency for International Development and the US International Development Finance Corporation can centralize aid to Gaza; vet employees of the UN and other international organizations working in Gaza (such as Doctors Without Borders) to ensure their staff have no ties to terror; and help build a sustainable development model that aims for independence from aid. In so doing, they would reject the UNRWA model that perpetuates the conflict by passing entitlements from generation to generation.

Gaza needs a smart and purposeful investment and a radical deradicalization agenda.

If Germans moving past their hatred in the 1940s was hard, what needs to happen in Gaza may be tougher – but not impossible.

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